



Coffee Break Training - Fire Investigation Series

Fire/Arson and Explosion Investigation Curriculum: Fire Scene Death Investigation

No. FI-2013-3 May 6, 2013

Learning Objective: The student will be able to identify the steps to properly conduct an initial examination of a fire scene where a death has occurred.

Fire scenes where a fatality has occurred require investigators to place increased attention on scene security, control, processing and documentation. Upon arrival, investigators should meet immediately with the Incident Commander or Officer-in-Charge for a briefing and ascertain if any artifacts or contamination may have been introduced to the scene prior to his or her arrival. The investigator should attempt to establish scene safety and strict security prior to entering the scene to prevent injury, including contacting appropriate agencies for assistance if necessary.

Upon arrival at the scene, the investigator should:

- Assess and/or establish physical boundaries.
- Secure vehicle(s) and park a safe distance from the scene.
- Use personal protective equipment (e.g., turnout gear, helmet, eye protection, gloves, respiratory protection, universal precautions for bloodborne pathogens, etc.).
- Arrange for removal of animals or secure them (if present and possible).
- Protect the integrity of the scene and evidence to the extent possible from contamination or loss by people, animals and elements.

Note: Due to potential scene hazards (e.g., crowd control, collapsing structures, toxic gases, traffic, etc.), the body may have to be removed before the scene investigation can be continued.

It is critical that investigators arrive on the scene as quickly as possible to determine the nature and scope of investigation by obtaining preliminary investigative details (e.g., circumstances surrounding death, confirm initial accounts of incident from witness(es)). Ensuring the integrity of the body by establishing and maintaining strict control of the scene and a chain of custody is vital to a fire death investigation. This will safeguard against subsequent allegations of tampering, theft, planting and/or contamination of evidence. Conducting a scene “walk through” provides the investigator with an overview of the entire scene and an opportunity to establish a path of entry and log of personnel, locate and view the body, identify and prevent loss or contamination of valuable and fragile evidence and determine the requisite initial investigative procedures for a systematic examination and documentation of the scene and body.

The investigator must follow applicable laws, policies and guidelines for the collection of evidence to ensure its admissibility in court. Investigators must work as part of a multidisciplinary team and recognize the varying jurisdictional and statutory responsibilities and authority that apply to individual agency representatives. This is essential in planning the scope and depth of each fire death investigation and sets the stage for a successful follow-up investigation to determine the cause and manner of death in a timely fashion.

Additional information on fire death investigation can be obtained from the *Investigating Fatal Fires* online training module at www.cfttrainer.net.



Security and safety at fire scenes where a fatality has occurred is critical to a successful investigation. (Photo courtesy of Prince George's County Fire Department (Maryland))